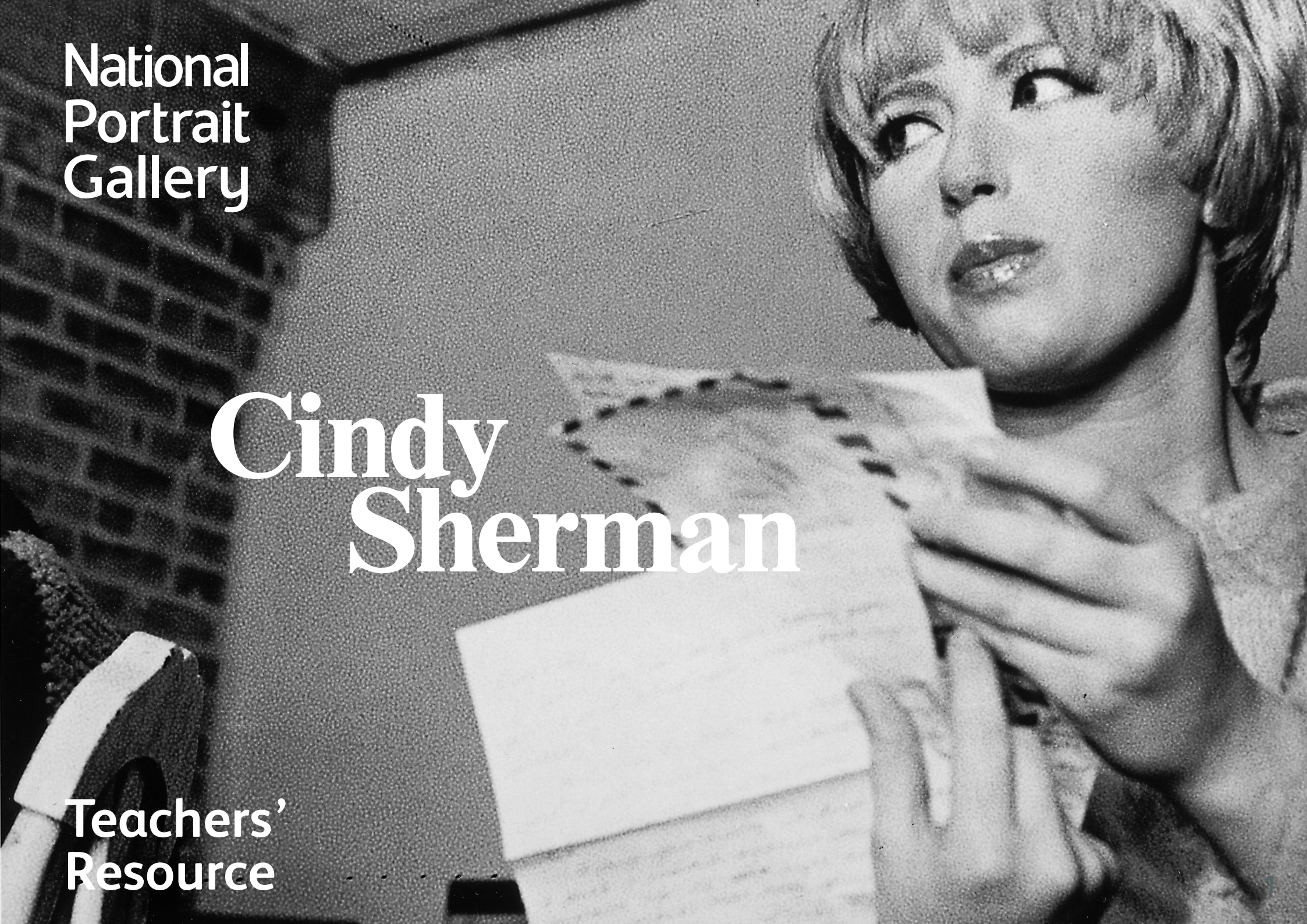


National
Portrait
Gallery

Cindy Sherman

Teachers'
Resource



Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) is one of the most important and influential artists working today. The exhibition *Cindy Sherman* at the National Portrait Gallery is a major new retrospective of her work and explores the development of her work from the mid-1970s to the present day.

Focusing on the artist's manipulation of her own appearance and her deployment of material derived from a range of cultural sources, including film, advertising and fashion, the exhibition explores the tension between façade and identity.

This resource enables teachers and students to draw out **key themes** within the exhibition and explore Cindy Sherman's artistic practice. Selected artworks will be starting points for conversation, debate and making around a range of themes including **image** and **identity, transformation, disguise, celebrity** and **popular culture**.

This resource aims to introduce lines of enquiry and encourage critical thinking from students. Before bringing a group to the exhibition, teachers are invited to visit the exhibition, read the resource and decide which aspects are most relevant for their group.

The information in the resource is suitable for **KS3** to **KS5** Secondary Art and Photography and encourages students to question what a portrait can be by exploring the artwork and working process of Cindy Sherman.

The resource can be used during and following a visit to the exhibition and, as a stand-alone guide for groups unable to visit the Gallery.

The exhibition *Cindy Sherman* includes iconic images and lesser-known works, which map Sherman's artistic career from her earliest photographs through to her most recent, exploring the relationship between appearance and reality. Famous for her use of make-up, costumes, props and prosthetics to transform her appearance and create complex and ambiguous photographic images, she invents fictitious characters, photographing herself in imaginary situations, inhabiting a world of pure appearance.

Sherman's fascination with film and dressing up began at a young age. As a child, Sherman became interested in cinema, watching films on television. A self-confessed 'child TV addict' she spent hours watching films at home. She also played with dressing up and began to transform her appearance wearing second hand clothes found in her family home and sourced from thrift stores.

The capacity of clothing to be transformative was no doubt fun, but Sherman's interest did not subside. In addition to her wardrobe, she also explored make-up, applying lipstick, rouge, mascara and so on to complete the illusion of whatever character she wished to invent.

(1)

p.27 *Cindy Sherman* catalogue,
Paul Moorhouse, NPG, 2019

EARLY WORK

Sherman was an art student at the State University College at Buffalo, which she attended from 1972 to 1976. At the outset, her fascination with transforming her own appearance focused mainly on her face. In “Untitled A–E” (fig 1), her concern is less with alteration than creating images of fully formed alter egos, an important development that characterises her later work.

Subsequently, Sherman’s focus shifted to her entire body. “Line-Up” (fig 2) was made after Sherman graduated and shortly before she left Buffalo for New York. Originally comprising 35 characters wearing make-up, masks, wigs and costumes, the series confirmed the chameleon-like character of Sherman’s art. (1)

p.27 *Cindy Sherman catalogue*,
Paul Moorhouse, NPG, 2019

Fig 1

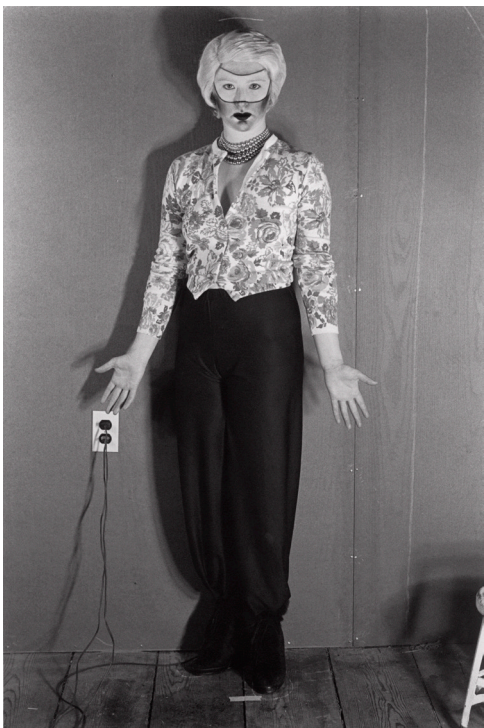


Cindy Sherman, *Untitled A*, 1975,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled D*, 1975,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Fig 2



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #500*, 1977/2011,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #501*, 1977/2011,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #502*, 1977/2011,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #503*, 1977/2011,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

DISCUSSION

Think about what is 'real' and 'unreal' about these images. Discuss with your group.

Why do you think Cindy Sherman is the model in the photograph as well as the person behind the camera taking the photograph?

What do we know about the characters in the artworks?

What stages would you need to go through to make an artwork in this way?

What do you think could be the stories of these characters (choose 2-3 to focus on)?

How important are the make-up, props, lighting and costume?

COVER GIRLS

The “Cover Girls” series was completed (in 1976) shortly after Sherman graduated from art school and while she was still living in Buffalo.

The series comprises five separate works, each consisting of three ‘covers’ of women’s magazines, namely: *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, *Family Circle*, *Redbook* and *Mademoiselle*. In each group of three, the first image is an original cover featuring the face of a model; the second shows Sherman whose features have been transformed by make-up to resemble the original model; in the third cover, Sherman retains the impersonation but adopts a ‘goofy face’, which mocks the appearance of the original. (1)

p.51 *Cindy Sherman* catalogue, Paul Moorhouse, NPG, 2019



Cindy Sherman, *Cover Girl (Cosmopolitan)*, 1975/2011, Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

DISCUSSION

Is there a message within these artworks?

Do the images make you rethink images you see – for example in magazines, on television, on social media, at the cinema, in advertising?

Why do you think so?

How would you describe how the three images change within this artwork and how has Sherman achieved this?

UNTITLED FILM STILLS

Sherman commenced the “Untitled Film Stills” shortly after she moved to New York in summer 1977. Her fascination with changing her own appearance in order to create fictitious personae was now combined with the creation of images in which there is an implied but unspecified narrative. The resulting photographs resemble shots taken on film sets as advertisements for cinematic features. Imitating the style of film stills, Sherman appears as a succession of characters in dramatic situations that hint at stories. Deliberately ambiguous, the photographs engage the viewer by inviting individual interpretation. Sherman began the series by photographing herself in her living space and studio, using basic props. Later, she had herself photographed in various outdoor locations in order to create a wider range of characters and contexts. (1)

p.59 *Cindy Sherman* catalogue,
Paul Moorhouse, NPG, 2019

Each image is anchored in familiar archetypes and tropes, invoking stories already known. Although there are hints of the postwar cinemas of Italy and France, Sherman’s primary references are low-budget American movies of the 1940s and ’50s, and film noir. (2)

p.60 *Cindy Sherman* catalogue,
Erika Balsom, NPG, 2019

The “Untitled Film Stills” repeat films that were already repetitions. Crucially, though, they are not recreations of existing images; they are evocations of historical styles and conventions with no single precedent. (2)

p.60 *Cindy Sherman* catalogue,
Erika Balsom, NPG, 2019



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #03*, 1977,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #48*, 1979,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #27*, 1979,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #58*, 1980,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

DISCUSSION

Sherman's groundbreaking *Untitled Film Stills* series, 1977-1980, comprises of 70 images.

What do you think these images have in common, and what are the differences?

What brings them together as a series?

Where has Cindy Sherman taken these photographs?

**How important is the environment to the photographs?
Can you think where you might see or find similar images?**

Focus on one work. What do we know about the character in the artwork? What do you think could be the story of this character?

Why do you think Cindy Sherman is the model in these artworks as well as the person behind the camera taking the photograph?

What stages would you need to go through to make an artwork in this way?

What do these images say to you in terms of female identities?

FASHION

The series of “Fashion” photographs that Sherman made from 1983 to 1984 strike a harsher note in their criticism of contemporary culture. While her invented characters wear stylish designer-label clothes, they appear neurotic and absurd. In an unusual display of scorn, Sherman explained,

‘I’m disgusted with how people get themselves to look beautiful ... I was trying to make fun of fashion.’ ⁽¹⁾

p.143 *Cindy Sherman* catalogue,
Paul Moorhouse, NPG, 2019



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #122*, 1983,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #137*, 1984,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

DISCUSSION

What is your first reaction to these images – discuss your reactions in your group.

Can you think where you might see or find similar images?

What do these images say to you in terms of fashion or advertising?

Do the images make you rethink images you see in the media?

HISTORY PORTRAITS

Employing an extravagant range of prosthetics (including false noses, breasts and skull caps) in combination with make-up, wigs and costumes, she made over 30 portraits of women and, unusually, a large number of men. Her subjects included aristocrats, ladies of leisure and even a Madonna and Child in compositions that explicitly recall styles of portraiture belonging to various periods, from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century.

The artifice inherent in Sherman's practice is now conspicuous, not least in her use of deliberately unconvincing prosthetics. This parodies the look of historical portraiture and also raises questions about the presence of illusion in images of people. (1)

p.59 *Cindy Sherman catalogue*,
Paul Moorhouse, NPG, 2019



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #206*, 1989,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #225*, 1990,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

DISCUSSION

What do you think are the sources or inspiration for these artworks?

What do these images say to you in terms of a hierarchy of imagery?

Are these works a performance for the camera? Discuss why you think so.

Does the image make you rethink images you see in a museum or gallery? Why is this?

Look closely at the images and discuss with your group the expression, pose, props, costume, make up and lighting. Does this change your initial reading of the portraits?

SOCIETY PORTRAITS



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #468*, 2008,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

In “Society Portraits” Sherman addressed issues of age and social status. The mature women depicted in these imposing portraits are confronting their advancing years and, as her masquerade in each image suggests, are resorting to cosmetic strategies to sustain an illusion of youthfulness. Despite make-up and evident recourse to surgery, the difficulty of maintaining a look that conforms to social expectations has a desperate aspect. (1)

p.203 *Cindy Sherman* catalogue,
Paul Moorhouse, NPG, 2019



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #474*, 2008,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

FLAPPERS



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #574*, 2008,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

In 2016 Sherman commenced a series of photographs inspired by the look of a distant age. Adopting hairstyles, make-up and fashions worn by women in the 1920s, she created several different characters, which she described as 'flappers'. That term refers to a generation of young women that emerged after the First World War, whose appearance and behaviour flouted convention. Characterised by conspicuous make-up, bobbed hairstyles and smoking in public, they conveyed an impression of liberated sensuality that contrasted with earlier norms of femininity. The theme of actresses is an appropriate metaphor for Sherman's own art, throughout which the artist appears in a succession of fictitious roles. (1)

p.225 *Cindy Sherman* catalogue,
Paul Moorhouse, NPG, 2019



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #580*, 2016,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

DISCUSSION

What do these portraits say to you in terms of the role and representation of women in society?

How does the scale of the work affect your experience of the image?

Do the images make you rethink images you see – for example in magazines, on television, on social media, at the cinema, in advertising? If so how?

STUDIO & PROCESS

Sherman lives and works in New York and her studio practice is essentially solitary. Mass media and modern culture generally have always fascinated her, and magazines, the internet and other sources provide a rich fund of ideas. Often, the look or style of certain images or objects may be a starting point for the creation of invented characters, which she develops using make-up and costumes for particular roles. In addition to cosmetics and clothes, Sherman also uses wigs, prosthetics and various props to feed the growth of these personae. The process of evolving a character is completed when Sherman feels ready to photograph herself in the role, thus creating a portrait of whatever imaginary 'stranger' she confronts in the full-length mirror that stands alongside her camera. Recently, Sherman has used digital technology to manipulate her photographed appearance and also to create illusionistic backdrops.

Collectively, these elements contribute to the formation of an extraordinary body of work in which dressing up, the use of make-up, photography and astute social commentary are essential aspects, and the creation and critiquing of appearances its vital themes. (1)

p.239 *Cindy Sherman* catalogue,
Paul Moorhouse, NPG, 2019



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #466*, 2008,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

ENDNOTES

Texts in this resource are reproduced from the exhibition catalogue *Cindy Sherman*, published to accompany the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, and available to purchase from the Gallery's shops and online.

(1) *Text by Paul Moorhouse, Cindy Sherman exhibition catalogue (National Portrait Gallery, London 2019)*

(2) *Text by Erika Balsom, Cindy Sherman exhibition catalogue (National Portrait Gallery, London 2019)*

Cover image:

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #05*, 1977,
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Cindy Sherman

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